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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
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SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE, EUR/PGI, INL, DRL, PRM, USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KV](#)

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: ALLEGATIONS OF POISONING ALBANIAN STUDENTS CAUSE
FOR ALARM

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Dozens of Albanian students from three schools in Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje have been admitted to Pristina's University Hospital over the past two days with complaints of dizziness, fatigue, and loss of consciousness amid media speculation that the students were the victims of intentional poisoning. All of the stricken students first developed symptoms while attending classes at two schools in Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje, a Pristina suburb. This is still a dynamic situation, and facts remain unclear, but our understanding, based on conversations with hospital officials, is that whatever illnesses the students have experienced are psychosomatic, not the result of poisoning. Nonetheless, reports of poisoning hold particular salience for Albanians, many of whom attribute an unsolved public health incident in 1990 among Albanian school children to a deliberate attempt by Serbs to poison their children. While Albanians are worried about poisoning, Serbs are concerned that Albanians may respond to press speculation about the incident with violent demonstrations directed at their communities. In the last few hours, we have been in contact with the Prime Minister's office, the Ministry of Health, and the hospital, advising them to issue fact-based statements about the incident aimed at calming public concerns. We have also been in touch with EULEX and KFOR and urged both institutions to be mindful that whatever the facts of the case, an irrational fear among both communities could drive reactions to it. END SUMMARY

ALLEGATIONS OF POISONING

¶2. (SBU) On September 30, 18 Albanian students at an elementary school in Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje were admitted to the hospital after complaining of dizziness, fatigue, and loss of consciousness. The students attended a school that instructs both Albanian and Serb students. The incident occurred in the late afternoon during an Albanian shift at the school. No Serb students were affected by the mysterious illness. All of the Albanian students were later released from the hospital, but media reporting centered on the image of crying mothers speculating about their children's health amid rumors of intentional poisoning.

13. (SBU) On October 1, dozens of additional students from two other schools in Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje complained of the same symptoms and were transported to Pristina's University Hospital. As of 1600, hospital sources told us that 102 patients had been admitted to various departments: 36 to the hospital, 63 to the Infectious Disease Center, and two to the Pediatric Center. Minister of Health Alush Gashi told us that the majority of the patients were Albanian girls born between 1991 and 1993, that by 1800 the hospital had released all but 16 of the patients, and that doctors could find no evidence of any serious ailment, including any evidence of poisoning. The Ministry of Health has sent sanitary and health inspectors to the schools in question. Both Gashi and the hospital's director have told us that they believe today's event is due to "mass hysteria."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

14. (SBU) In March 1990 a similar case of alleged poisoning occurred at a school in Podujeve/Podujevo and affected scores of students. Following the incident, Serbs in Podujeve/Podujevo faced hostility from Albanians in the community, and there were reports that up to 50 Serbs suffering brutal beatings at the hands of Albanians. Over the ensuing weeks similar reports of alleged poisoning followed from other schools across Kosovo. At the time, girls reported symptoms more frequently than boys. The 1990 incident remains unsolved to this day, but many Albanians believe that Serbs deliberately poisoned their children.

MEDIA COVERAGE

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15. (SBU) This situation remains dynamic and local television media are offering frequent updates about the incident that stress the word "poison" and offer an ever-increasing count of the number of affected students. Right now the media are operating with limited information, but make constant use of the word "poison," which runs the risk of heightening ethnic tensions. Images of scared parents carrying their children from ambulances and private cars into the emergency room have heightened the sense of panic. The Serb Minister for Communities and Returns Sasha Rasic telephoned us late in the afternoon to relate to us what he characterized as growing concern within Serb communities that Albanians would lash out at them over the incident.

GOVERNMENT REACTION

16. (SBU) We have been in close contact with the Prime Minister's office, numerous ministers, and the hospital throughout the afternoon. We have advised them to issue fact-based statements that avoid using provocative or inflammatory language. The aim, we have stressed, should be to calm the situation and to allay fears among both communities of a repeat of the events of 1990. Specifically, we told the Prime Minister's office to use its statement to reframe the issue and get away from unfounded allegations of poisoning that could inflame passions and heighten the possibility of spontaneous outbreaks of violence between Albanians and Serbs. The government's statement did not refer to poison and treated the incident as a public health event that was under control with relevant authorities responding appropriately. In an effort to calm the situation, the Ministry of Education told us that it plans to close schools tomorrow in Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje while the Ministry of Health continues its inspection. We have also advised all parties to avoid depicting the schools as a crime scene during their activities on October 2.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) As of 1900, the situation in Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje is calm, and KFOR's Liaison Monitoring Team (LMT) has personnel on the ground alert for any public gatherings or demonstrations. The concern at the moment is not about a poisoning incident. Thus far,

there is no evidence of poisoning, but we do not want to see a frightened public lashing out at the Serb community in a misguided search for revenge. We have stressed this point (and possibility) to EULEX and KFOR as well. The health scare may not be an event, but managing public perception will require further work, and we can expect that the GOK on October 2 will turn to us and other international partners for assistance in analyzing blood samples of students admitted to the hospital. The GOK will also look for help in reassuring a public that is prone to panic.

MURPHY